

**Narrator:** Michael Landa

**Interviewers:** Suzana Blake

**Location:** Miami, Florida

**Project Name:** Endangered Fishing Traditions of the Greater Miami Area

**Project Description:** Broadly, the project seeks to preserve the rich history of endangered fishing traditions in the Greater Miami Area. These oral histories expand our knowledge and enrich our understanding of the region's fisheries as well as the role that fishing has had in shaping the region's economic and cultural life. Our goal was to interview key individuals connected to the fishing history of Miami, including commercial and for-hire fishers, fish dealers/processors, fish markets, and bait and tackle shops. Geographically, we aim to cover major fishing areas that are endangered and undergoing rapid change. These include the following: Miami River, Coconut Grove (Montys), and Haulover Park in North Miami. The first collection of interviews is focused on the Miami River. These interviews are conducted in English and Spanish.

**Principal Investigators:** Suzana Dumitrita Blake, Matthew McPherson, Vanessa Navarro Maza, and Pamela Brown-Eyo

**Affiliations:** Southeast Fisheries Science Center and HistoryMiami Museum

**Transcript Team:** Fantastic Transcripts; Molly Graham

**Date of Interview:** February 12, 2020

**Abstract:** On February 12, 2020, Michael Landa, a long-time fisherman, was interviewed at the NOAA Fisheries offices in Miami. Born in Cuba in 1949, Landa moved to the United States in 1957. Growing up near the Miami River, his interest in fishing developed early, influenced by the local fishing activities he observed. Despite no family background in fishing, Landa pursued his passion, starting commercially in 1974 with crawfishing, later expanding to ballyhoo and hook-and-line fishing. Landa detailed the evolution of his career, highlighting significant milestones, such as purchasing his own boat in 1982. He reminisced about the thriving fishing community in Miami during the 1970s and 1980s, dominated by Cuban fishermen. However, he noted a decline in fish populations and changes in the industry, attributing it to increased regulations and environmental issues like pollution. Throughout his career, Landa experienced the impacts of regulatory changes on fishing practices, such as restrictions on mackerel and snapper catches. He emphasized the challenges posed by these regulations, which often

conflicted with his ability to sustain his livelihood. Despite these hurdles, Landa expressed his enduring love for fishing, valuing the freedom and connection to nature it provided. Landa also discussed the socio-economic aspects of fishing, reflecting on the community's dynamics and the industry's role in Miami's culture. He expressed concerns about the future of commercial fishing, given the increasing urbanization and regulatory pressures. The interview concluded with Landa sharing his pragmatic approach to financial management and his outlook on the industry's future.

Suzana Blake: ... I'm here with Michael Landa. Correct?

Michael Landa: Yes, ma'am.

SB: Can you say your name? How do you say it?

ML: Michael Landa.

SB: Landa. Perfect. Today is February 12, 2020. We are at the NOAA Fisheries offices in Miami. Michael, I'm going to ask you to start by just telling me how you started in the fishing business. Was your family involved? When did you start? What were you fishing? Where were you fishing? All of that.

ML: I grew up in Miami. I lived near the river all my life. I came to this country in 1957 at the age of eight years old. We used to live over there by the houses there, where [the] I-95 overpass over the river is. From there, I moved a little bit to the north, but I would hang around the river and lived there. I used to see the mackerel boats – East Coast Fisheries and National Fisheries and all those places. They used to have their boats there with their mackerel nets and stuff like that. I've always liked to fish. It was something I liked. I became a fisherman because I really wasn't an ace student, a good student.

SB: This was your passion?

ML: Yes.

SB: Was anybody in your family fishing?

ML: No, nobody.

SB: How did you –?

ML: I'm a country boy. I was born in Cuba in the country.

SB: I see.

ML: My grandfather used to take me fishing to the rivers, but I was never near the ocean.

SB: What part of Cuba?

ML: Las Villas.

SB: Las Villas? It's central? You can say it in Spanish.

ML: It's one of the provinces.

SB: One of the provinces.

ML: There used to be, I think, six or seven provinces. Now, the new government we got, [inaudible] they made a whole bunch of provinces. They divided the country up.

SB: Why did you come in the first place? You said you were eight years old. Did you come with your parents?

ML: My aunt had been living here since before World War II. She spent World War II here in the United States working in a munitions factory and stuff like that. In 1955, something like that, she –

SB: Petitioned?

ML: Petitioned for my dad. So my dad worked here, and then he petitioned for my mom and myself. They only had one kid: me – one child.

SB: So, you came. Your father was already here.

ML: Yes. My aunt petitioned for him. Then afterward, once he settled here, he petitioned for us.

SB: So how did you start in the fishing business? Were you a fisherman working for someone?

ML: I started fishing in 1974 – crawfish. I bought a crawfish boat. I fished a couple of times in the Bahamas when we used to be able to crawfish in the Bahamas. Then I fished with (John Diagam?), a ballyhoo fisherman. I don't know if you've heard of him.

SB: No.

ML: (John Diagam?). I fished with him. I started fishing ballyhoo with (John Diagam?) in 1977. I was more or less practically fishing my boat and fishing ballyhoo with him when he needed a [inaudible] one of his mates had to go to the dock or something like that, he called me.

SB: Got it. That was in the first few years.

ML: Yes. Then, in 1982, I built the boat, and I started fishing hook and line. Sometimes, like I said, I used to fish ballyhoo when he needed somebody, when he needed a mate [inaudible].

SB: What do you remember about that period, about how the fishing was? What was the community of fishermen back then?

ML: There were quite a few more commercial hook and line fishermen. Most of them were Cubans that came from Cuba. Most of them, they already passed away. I don't know. There used to be more fish here, but I don't know what's happening. I don't know if it's the pollution that comes out of the Miami River.

SB: When did you notice a change? A dramatic change?

ML: Fishing is a cycle. Sometimes there's plenty of fish. Sometimes they're not there. Just like crawfish. The first year I fished crawfish, plenty of crawfish. The guy who was fishing for, he told me, "This is not like this every year. This is an exceptional year. There might be a couple of good years of crawfish, and there will be plenty of crawfish. Then there will be four or five years of – like this year. This year has been terrible for crawfishing.

SB: So you think this is part of the natural cycle?

ML: Right, I guess. Everything move in schools – a school of crawfish, a school of fish. I remember in the 1980s when they did away with the wire traps, the fish wire traps. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

SB: Yes.

ML: There used to be the [inaudible] brothers. They used to fish with the wire traps over giant traps. When we used to get a nor'easter, some type of weather nasty – when they pulled them traps, they used to carry seven, eight, ten, fifteen-thousand pounds of snapper and three or four-thousand pounds of grouper. I figure when they did away with the wire traps, the snappers were going to really get plentiful, and they're not there unless you be there. They did away with the longlines. There used to be quite a few boats that used to do longline. They used to start longlining right there [inaudible] and longline all the way down to Key Largo and back. They used to catch five, six-hundred pounds of little snappers because longline is – catch them little snappers. Besides, they were the fishing right there in the shallow water, the finger channels. I figure they're really going to come back, and they haven't. I see a lot of little snappers. Fishing right there from [inaudible] beach in twenty feet of water – when I fish there, [inaudible] three. One was fifteen. The other one was seventeen, like that. It's hard to [inaudible].

SB: Do you think when they changed the regulations, the whole point was to raise the population of snapper, but you haven't seen an increase?

ML: Right. Stuff I learned from Mr. (Diagamo?) and his brother, [and] from the old-timers – they used to say if the Thanksgiving turkey is on the table and the mackerels are not down to Sawyer Key, it's a bad year. I say, "Why? What's the reason?" He says, "It has to get cold." Right here in Miami, in October and early November, you got to get one crazy cold front – right here in Miami, it will come down to the 40s. That will move the mackerel down. If you don't get that type of cold weather, they stay up there to the north. They don't come down. I think it's true. We don't get cold weather here like we used to years ago. I remember in the '60s, I think it was colder. We used to have more colder weather in the '70s. Lately, it's like summertime year-round.

SB: No, it's an accurate assessment. Average temperatures have increased. Let's go back a little bit again. Let's go back to the early days when you started fishing. You said you were fishing some in the Bahamas. Where else?

ML: Crawfish in the Bahamas.

SB: Crawfish. Where else? Where else were you fishing? You were living from the Miami River?

ML: Yes.

SB: Where were you docking? Where was your boat?

ML: I didn't get on the boat. I wish I was a mate. Right there, where Casablanca is, they used to call the place [called] Better Bait.

SB: Bat and bait?

ML: Better Bait.

SB: Better Bait? I haven't heard of this.

ML: They used to pack ballyhoos and sardines and shrimp and grind chum.

SB: Grind chum?

ML: Yes.

SB: What were they grinding?

ML: Bunkers.

SB: What's that?

ML: Some fish. I think they catch them in Georgia, and they bring them from Georgia and then grind them up for blood chum.

SB: So you had your boat docked here at Better Bait.

ML: No, they used to keep them right there at the entrance of the Seybold Canal. Years ago, they made a park now. I don't know if you're familiar.

SB: Yes, somewhat.

ML: They've got a little park there. That's what the boats from Better Bait – they used to keep their crawfish traps over there. The boats that used to fish in the [inaudible] used to dock there.

SB: When you got your own boat, you had it there, too.

ML: In the Seybold Canal, behind Mr. (Diagamo's?) house.

SB: Seybold Canal?

ML: Seybold Canal. The little canal right there in the Fifth Street Bridge.

SB: By the Fifth Street Bridge.

ML: Yes, the little canal.

SB: You were renting there?

ML: No, he never wanted to charge me rent because I fished with him. I was fishing ballyhoo with him. He never charged me rent.

SB: So that was his dock?

ML: Yes.

SB: This person's dock?

ML: Yes, he had a house there. He passed away a couple of years [ago].

SB: So personal property, basically?

ML: Yes, Mr. (Diagamo's?) property.

SB: He had a big fleet or just a big boat?

ML: No, he just had a little twenty-four-footer. We used to fish ballyhoo. Before they did away with nets, he used a mackerel net. If the mackerel show up, he fished mackerel.

SB: Was he working for a certain –? Was he selling also at Better Bait or other places?

ML: Well, the ballyhoo he was selling at Better Bait. Mackerel and pompano and stuff like that, he would sell at National Fisheries.

SB: Got it. I see. In general, but he didn't have a contract?

ML: No, no.

SB: But National Fisheries was the best place back then to –?

ML: Well, back then, it used to be East Coast Fisheries.

SB: East Coast Fisheries.

ML: It's gone now. It was right there, between the Flagler Bridge and the First Street Bridge. There was National Fish. And what was the other one? Superior Fish.

SB: Superior?

ML: Yes. They used to sell to either East Coast or National Fish or Superior; it depended.

SB: So, those three were –?

ML: Yes.

SB: Okay. Can you think back a little bit to when you started fishing to today? What were some of the major changes that occurred on the river, in terms of economy or pressures? You talked a little bit about the change in water temperature that affects the fish. What else did you notice? What were some major things that changed your business?

ML: I don't know. Years ago, we used to catch jacks [amberjacks] up and down, especially right in front of here. Just south of the [inaudible], there used to be a spot there, and you used to catch plenty of jacks there. Since they made the jacks twenty-four inches and they put a closed season – grouper and stuff like that – they disappeared; they don't show up.

SB: So you think that –? What do you think?

ML: I don't know. [laughter]

SB: When did you notice that?

ML: The late '90s. When NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] – because I used to remember – I used to sell [inaudible] – the old-timer that was there, Frank-something – I don't remember his name. He had a fish house. Once a night, every time I caught a grouper, he said I got to save them for NOAA because they were studying them.

SB: Their size?

ML: Like amberjacks – all them wrecks upfront over there, used to be loaded with amberjacks.

SB: Not anymore?

ML: After they made them twenty-eight inches and they put a closed season, they've disappeared. I don't know.

SB: That's interesting.

ML: Snappers move. They don't live in one place all the time. They scatter around. They move around. So I don't know what's happening.



SB: Let's talk a little bit again about how your business evolved. You said you started working for someone, some fishing in the Bahamas for ballyhoo, and then you got your own boat. When did you get your own boat?

ML: 1982.

SB: '82. You got your own boat in '82. You were still doing some fishing with –

ML: (Diego?).

SB: (Diego?). How did your business evolve? Were you working by yourself? Did you have a crew?

ML: No.

SB: No? By yourself.

ML: I fished by myself.

SB: How was a day in your life back then when you got your first boat?

ML: Well, depends. Fishing is not an easy thing. I was telling –

SB: Matt?

ML: – Matt. I could be fishing here, and there could be a hundred snapper under the boat. If there's no current, they're not going to bite. You need current.

SB: So you would wake up early in the morning?

ML: Yes.

SB: And check the weather first?

ML: No, no. It depends. I listen to the NOAA Weather Channel. If I don't listen to the weather channel, I just go out there and look at the clouds. If you see the clouds streaking by, forget it.

SB: You're not going to work?

ML: No, I'm not going to work. I'm not going to go out there and take a beating. I got to catch my own bait in the morning and then go out. I fish with light bait. I can't tell anything about the groupers. When we used to catch the most of the groupers, it's January, February, March, and some in April. Since it's closed – I don't know – I don't fish them. I found a spot there to the north, the Government Cut – I anchored there with a [inaudible] for kingfish. I always put a bottom line. They hit it. They got [inaudible]. I said, "That was a grouper." That day I ended up catching – I think it was six black groupers, three jacks, and one red grouper. So I got them.

SB: When was this?

ML: The '90s.

SB: In the '90s.

ML: But I haven't been back. Well, I kept fishing there. I used to go and catch during the season. We call the grouper season when they're spawning; that's when you catch the most. Go there and catch four or five jacks, and go back the next day and catch two, three. But I don't fish there no more. You always still catch a black grouper there. I don't know if there's any amounts because I can't fish anymore in January, February, March, and April. I've got to wait until May to catch a grouper.

SB: So, in the 1980s, when you had your own boat, how was the business? You were making a good living back then? Were you able to support your family well and put money aside? Was it a good business back then for you?

ML: Yes, it was good. My main goal every day is to make at least a hundred dollars. If I make more, I make more. If I make less –

SB: Okay. Has that changed? Did you have any moments where you just consistently couldn't make that money?

ML: No.

SB: No?

ML: I usually make a hundred dollars a day. It has to be real bad for me.

SB: And you work five days a week?

ML: Yes, five days a week. Weekends, there's too many sport fishermen out there. Not that they bother me. Well, they bother me because sometimes they anchor behind your stern. "Hey, don't anchor behind my stern." "Hey, you think you own the ocean?" "Please, give me a break." You got a whole ocean to yourself, and you're going to come and anchor behind my stern, right there? It has to be that there's plenty of fish for me to go out there and fish. If there's not plenty of fish, I'm not going to bother going out there on a weekend.

SB: Right. What were you doing in the 1990s?

ML: Fishing.

SB: Were you still fishing the same?

ML: Yes, absolutely.

SB: You had the same boat?

ML: I've still got the same boat.

SB: You were targeting the same species?

ML: I target blue runner, crevalle jack, Spanish mackerel, king mackerel, lesser amberjack when they show up, yellowtails, snappers, and groupers.

SB: Where do you sell? Where did you sell in the 1990s?

ML: Casablanca.

SB: Since the '90s?

ML: Yes, I've been fishing –

SB: What made you change to Casablanca?

ML: I always fish there.

SB: You were mentioning earlier – it was Better Bait just for the [inaudible].

ML: It was Better Bait. Then Better Bait had a piece of the property that had it rented out to a fish market. I don't know if the guy quit or they raised the monthly rent and the guy – so they made a restaurant there.

SB: What was the restaurant named?

ML: Joe's Seafood.

SB: Joe's Seafood?

ML: Joe's Seafood. Then in the middle, they had the parking space for the trucks that have to deliver the bait and stuff like that to the tackle shops. They made the fish market there. It's still there. They've got the restaurant, the fish market. Where the bait business used to be, it's just part of the fish house now. There are no more bait [inaudible].

SB: When did that happen? When did they sell their business, more or less?

ML: In the 1990s.

SB: Somewhere?

ML: Not '90s. 1980s.

SB: Late '80s?

ML: Or early '80s, they made the restaurant and the fish market.

SB: Who taught you how to fish? Was it the person with who you started?

ML: No, I learned by myself.

SB: You learned by yourself? Okay. What was the biggest difficulty when you began? Was there something that was giving you a lot of trouble?

ML: Sometimes, the bait.

SB: Sometimes, the bait?

ML: Yes, the bait.

SB: Well, you mentioned that when you started fishing, there were a lot of Cuban fishermen.

ML: Right.

SB: Was there any – did you talk to them? Learn from them? What was the community of fishermen when you started? How did that change throughout the years? Or is it a very independent kind of thing?

ML: It's independent. I didn't talk to them.

SB: No?

ML: Now, there's only about three or four left.

SB: Okay. On the Miami River per se, you didn't actually fish, did you, in the river?

ML: In the river? No.

SB: You just used it for selling your merchandise –

ML: Merchandise.

SB: – docking –

ML: Docking.

SB: – and stuff like that?

ML: Right.

SB: You don't use any traps?

ML: No, no.

SB: So, you didn't need that. You still don't have any crew members?

ML: No, no. I fish by myself. I might take a friend of mine that wants to go fishing, but I fish by myself.

SB: Talk to me a little bit about the seasons of fishing. Each month or every few months, there's a certain fish that you target? Is it more advantageous?

ML: Usually, I start targeting king mackerel and Spanish mackerel in October, if they ever come out. Last season was so-so. This year, if they came – one day in October, I had a hundred-and-fifty-nine pounds of Spanish mackerel [inaudible], nice king. The next day, I went and only caught two kings and thirty-four pounds of mackerel. After that, they disappeared. I figured with the storms that went up the coast, the hurricanes that went up the coast to the Carolinas, it was going to move plenty of fish down this way. If they did, they kept on going south. Because after that, I had another day that I caught sixty pounds of mackerel. After that, I was just fishing yellowtail. I catch a couple of mackerel – twenty, twenty-five pounds of mackerel. One day there, the kingfish started biting, but it was hook them, measure them, and throw them back.

SB: Why?

ML: It's got to be twenty-four inches [inaudible].

SB: Oh, I see. The regulations.

ML: The regulations. I hook thirty. Out of the thirty, I only kept about eight or ten. The rest were too short.

SB: What do you think happens with the ones you put back?

ML: They take off.

SB: They take off?

ML: As long as I don't [inaudible] them. That day, when they started jumping in a frenzy, I was hook and lining them by hand with the yo-yo.

SB: Are you satisfied with that regulation?

ML: Yeah. But the kind mackerels – okay, twenty-four inches. It's okay. Sometimes you catch one; he might not be twenty-four inches, but his body is like that, but he's not twenty-four. You

got to throw him back, though. But making the snapper from sixteen to eighteen – and I heard they want to make it nineteen, and the yellowtail is fourteen inches. I don't really want to fish for it.

SB: Because it's very hard to catch that?

ML: Yes. One day, you might catch a few big yellowtails, but you're not going to catch big yellowtails every day. The regular size [inaudible] twelve inches and a little bit better.

SB: What other fish become available during the year?

ML: Like I said, October, November, December, I fish for king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, blue runners, crevalle jack, and some bottom fishing for snapper if there's any around. They're not always around. Like I said, they come, and they go. Like I was telling Matt, I started fishing shrimp, doing shrimping in the bay at night because –

SB: Oh, yes?

ML: Yes. It was usually January, February, March. Every time you got a cold front, you got a nor'easter that blows sometimes for a week, two weeks there – twenty-five knots. I'm not going to go out there with twenty-five knots of wind.

SB: It's dangerous.

ML: So I started fishing shrimp at night in the bay.

SB: How's that working for you?

ML: The first year I fished, it was bad. They show up for one week, and then they disappeared. You go out there. You spend the whole night to catch a hundred and fifty pounds of shrimp. But then they started showing up the next season. I [inaudible] 22,000 pounds in one season. The last good season I had, I think I caught 18,000 pounds in 2010. After that, it's been going downhill. I don't know why. I don't know if it's because of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Those shrimps, I think they come from the Gulf of Mexico, and they come down through the Keys. I've heard they come through – I don't know where they're coming now. They used to call it Jewfish Creek. That was the name – Jewfish Creek. Now, they changed it to goliath. I think the Jewish people started complaining about it. I think they come through there, and they come through [inaudible] they come out here. But last year, I was only fishing for – there was nothing in January. I caught a few in February. In March, I think I caught – I didn't even catch a thousand pounds last year. Then I said, "The hell with this." The weather was nice. I was catching a few kingfish, a few mackerel. I was making a hundred, a hundred-and-fifty, a hundred-and-seventy dollars a day. I said, "I'll go fishing." But this year, last month they showed up on a Sunday – the people that went out – it was only a couple of boats. A friend of mine had five hundred pounds. I went the next day – nothing, nothing, nothing. They disappeared. Since the first quarter, I've been going out every night. Sunday, I caught sixty-two pounds.

SB: That's good.

ML: No.

SB: That's not good for a night?

ML: No.

SB: What would be good?

ML: A good night? Eight-hundred, nine-hundred, a thousand pounds.

SB: Wow.

ML: [laughter] I went Tuesday night – you called me Monday. Pam called me Monday. There was nothing. I didn't even put my nets over [inaudible]. You turn on the lights, and you run around, you see them swimming around. I saw one here, one over there, the other a half a block that way. There was nothing.

SB: There was nothing.

ML: So I don't know if they're going to show up or not.

SB: Are you going to still keep trying, or are you just going to go fish [inaudible]?

ML: I'm going to wait. Well, it's been so nasty; I don't want to go out there. It's been nasty. This week has been nasty.

SB: Very windy.

ML: Yes. Last week, it was nasty. I'm going to start back up Sunday. I'm not going to bother with fishing this week because the tide gets later, later, later every night. Tuesday, it didn't start leaving until ten in the evening. Last night, it was later. Tonight's going later. If there were plenty of shrimp, I don't mind getting up and going out there [at] eleven, twelve, one in the morning. But I'm just going to waste my time.

SB: Why is the tide important? I'm sorry.

ML: Because they usually run with ebbside. Sometimes, when they come in, they'll run with a flood tide.

SB: Got it.

ML: One year, with my wife, I went to the [inaudible] back there to see the people that cast net for shrimp, and nothing – catching two, three [inaudible] stuff like that. The next day, I went to

[inaudible] to get a timetable for the tide. There was an old guy there they call (Pepe?), who used to hang around the bridge. He said, “Whoa, last night, you should have seen the shrimp.” I said, “(Pepe?), don’t give me a story. I was there.” He said, “No, no. When the tide started ebbing, they came in [inaudible].” It was true. I went there that evening. They were chockablock. Right now, nothing has come in – no [inaudible]. Just a few last month and that was it. This month, there hasn’t been – unless they show up now when the moon starts going down.

SB: So what do you do when there’s no shrimp, and it’s too hard to go?

ML: Stay home. Watch TV.

SB: Enjoy the vacation. But you make enough throughout the year to compensate?

ML: No, I’m retired.

SB: You’re retired.

ML: I’m retired.

SB: If you were not retired, what –?

ML: I’m not going to go out there and take a beating. Like I was telling Matt – one day, I was fishing on the beach for mackerel and blue runners, and they [inaudible] by, or the water got too muddy [inaudible] right there in twenty-four feet of water. I went there because I usually catch blue runners there. I went there, and there was mackerel there, and the blue runners were there. A few kingfish showed up there. Sometimes there’s [inaudible] there, and that’s what they eat. I said, “Oh, they quit biting. I’m going home.” I pull my anchor [inaudible] the way I pulled it right there. I went, “Oh, let me put it back in place and put it nice.” When I was walking forward, I got hit by a [inaudible]. I tried to grab – I had a grapple hook for the rocks [inaudible]. It was brand new. The tips were razor sharp. My left foot between the pinky toe, I stuck it right there and *whoosh*, blood gushing out. I usually keep Vaseline in the boat. So I put some Vaseline, wrap it up. I didn’t go to the doctor. The next day, it was starting to get dark. So I went to see a doctor friend of mine. He looked at it, and he says, “Michael, that looks bad.” So he says, “Did you bring money with you?” He doesn’t charge me anything. He’s my friend. Sometimes he goes fishing with me once in a while, when he used to live here. Now he lives down in the Keys. I said, “Yeah.” He says, “I’m going to call a couple of pharmacists around here and see if they got an antibiotic.” So they had it. I went and bought the bottle of antibiotics.

SB: It was infected.

ML: Yes. So he gave me a shot.

SB: When you were working, you didn’t have medical insurance?

ML: I don’t have –



SB: No.

ML: No.

SB: You never had medical insurance?

ML: Well, now my wife –

SB: Now because you're retired –

ML: Retired. Besides, when my wife was working in Barnes and Noble there in Miracle Mile, we had insurance.

SB: So were there moments in your life, before you retired, when were you were concerned about having to go to the doctor?

ML: I've never been a sick person. Since I've gotten old now, I got high pressure.

SB: Blood pressure?

ML: Blood pressure. Other than that, I'm healthy.

SB: Do you know of any examples from the fishermen you knew? Had to face a major medical issue and didn't have any insurance?

ML: No.

SB: No? Most of them are healthy.

ML: Yes.

SB: Most of them have insurance or not have insurance?

ML: I don't know. I guess they might have some. I don't know. I don't question them.

SB: Is that a situation that you would like to have different?

ML: Beg your pardon?

SB: Do you think it would have been a good idea to have medical insurance when you were working?

ML: Not really. Like I said, I've been healthy all my life.

SB: I'm asking because I don't know how available it is for fishermen in general or affordable.

ML: You can get it, but you got to pay for it.

SB: Affordable [inaudible].

ML: I don't know how affordable, what the [inaudible].

SB: It was not something that concerned you.

ML: No, it wasn't.

SB: Let's go back. You said the end of the year you fish for certain fish, and then you tried shrimping for the first three months of the year.

ML: Right. Usually, I wait until the king mackerel go back north, when they migrate [inaudible] April, May.

SB: Okay. King mackerel.

ML: After they go by, that's when I start fishing yellowtail – June and July. But now they closed June and July for yellowtail.

SB: So what would you do now if you had to make a living in June and July?

ML: I heard they want to close them too – mangrove snappers. I heard they want to put a closed season on mangrove snapper, too. If they do that, well, that's about the only thing I can go there – there's a spot there I like baiting. Sometimes I flatline them in the daytime, not at nighttime – in the daytime. I only fish daytime. I catch them on the bottom with live bait. But if they close mangrove snapper, too. I'm not going to go chasing dolphins because dolphins – I've caught plenty of dolphins.

SB: You did?

ML: Yeah. [inaudible] One day, I had two-hundred-and-fifty pounds in eighty feet of water. They came, and they were milling around the boat. They never left. They stayed around the boat. For me to go chasing them, the chasing the birds and the [inaudible] unless they're close by, and I see them. But venture out there, fifteen, twenty miles out there in the Gulf Stream, looking for them? No, no. [laughter]

SB: In the past, though, what was your season? What was June and July?

ML: Yellowtail.

SB: You were going after yellowtail, basically.

ML: Yellowtail in the daytime.

SB: Yellowtail. And?

ML: Sometimes, maybe a snapper or two.

SB: But yellowtail mainly.

ML: Yellowtail mainly and mangrove snappers. Sometimes you catch – this year I was fishing for yellowtail, and I caught a snapper. So I put a line overboard, and they were there. There was a little school there. As soon as the bait hit the [water], I caught ten, one right after the other.

SB: Let's talk about the gear you use. Is it the same gear that you use to fish with in the past?

ML: The same.

SB: Same thing? What do you use for the end of the year? What kind of gear do you use?

ML: For yellowtail fish, I use a number two [inaudible], and for bottom fish, I use a number eight straight hook.

SB: So hook and line?

ML: Yes.

SB: For shrimp, is –?

ML: Nets.

SB: Nets.

ML: Wing nets.

SB: You've always done pretty much the same thing? Okay. Tell me a little bit about your relationship with Casablanca. How has that changed since you started working for them? Are you satisfied? Is there something you would like to see different?

ML: No.

SB: Why did you choose Casablanca in the first place?

ML: There's no more fish houses on the river.

SB: There's no more fish –

ML: They're going to have to keep an icebox on the boat and take the fish out and run someplace, another fish house. I think there's one way up there on 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue [inaudible] up there. I don't know. That's the only fish house left there on the river.

SB: This has changed in the last two decades, perhaps – one or two decades. In the past, there were more fish houses, though.

ML: Yes. There were a couple there, but they –

SB: Still not [inaudible] –

ML: They're gone. They closed.

SB: They closed? Still, you chose from the beginning Casablanca, and you stayed with them.

ML: Yes.

SB: Why did you choose Casablanca?

ML: Like I said, it's the only fish house there.

SB: Well, right now. No, I'm saying in the past.

ML: In the past? Well, they're pretty good for the price for the fish.

SB: The price was good?

ML: Yes.

SB: They were offering good prices.

ML: When Joe's Seafood was there, the guy that was running the place was paying me a dollar a pound for kingfish. That was in the '80s. I talked to another fisherman who used to fish there, and he says, "Oh, I went to Joe's Seafood. They pay me \$1.25 for the kingfish." I said, "What?" I've been fishing there for them, and they're paying somebody else from the street \$1.25, and they're giving me a dollar? So, one day, I came and sold fish not to Casablanca when Casablanca [inaudible] to an old-timer who was there; it was Frank-something. He used to buy king mackerel, snapper, and stuff like that. I think it was fifty pounds of kingfish. He paid me [inaudible]. I said, "You gave me too much money." He says, "Why? It's two dollars a pound." [laughter] I said, "Oh, yeah?" So I quit fishing for Joe's Seafood. I was fishing then for Frank and for Casablanca. Then, when Casablanca [inaudible], I stayed with them because, like I said, there's no more fish houses.

SB: Are you satisfied with the price they pay now for the fish?

ML: Yes. Depends. When there's too much kingfish, they'll bring the price down. They'll pay three dollars a pound. I think they brought it down to \$2.50. I think now they might be up to three dollars, but there ain't many kingfish out there. Getting \$1.50/pound for mackerel, three dollars a pound for snapper and yellowtail, four dollars a pound for grouper when you catch them.

SB: So, it depends on supply and demand.

ML: The supply, yes. Sometimes they get a good deal from Key West, and they'll buy a couple of thousand pounds of king mackerel from Key West when they start catching them down in Key West.

SB: What about your boat? Do you anchor at Casablanca now, or do you have another place?

ML: I got another place. I tell you, on the Seybold Canal.

SB: Same place. Is your house there, too?

ML: No, no. I don't have a house. I should have a house there, but like a dummy, I didn't buy it. Mr. (Diagamo?) told me one day in the '90s – he says, “Michael, do you want to buy the house?” Me, like a dummy – I didn't even ask him, “How much do you want for the house, Mr. (Diagamo?)?” He passed away. He told his daughter – she was taking care of the estate and stuff like that. He says, “As long as you own the property, Michael can tie his boat there for free.” But one of his – [sons] sold it – greedy. Telling his sister, “Well, how come Michael ain't paying rent?” “Michael ain't paying rent because dad said Michael tie his [boat up here].” His niece was living in the house. They fixed up the house and his niece – “How come my niece ain't paying so much rent? She should be paying more rent than she's paying.” He was driving her crazy. After five years, she told me, “Michael, I'm sorry. You're going to have to move this. I'm going to put the house up for sale because my brother is driving me nuts. I can't take it no more.” So I should have bought the house. He told me, “I'm not going to live forever,” which is true – big mistake.

SB: But now, you have another place?

ML: I tie up right across the canal. I used to tie here. I tie right across. Now I pay eighty dollars rent, which is not bad. Eighty dollars is not bad.

SB: Per month?

ML: Month.

SB: But you never wanted to dock at Casablanca.

ML: There's no dock there.

SB: There's no dock.

ML: Sometimes, we unload the fish there on a weekend.

SB: It's very hard.

ML: Sometimes, even during the week – no, people come in their boats to eat there. You get there, and you got to sit around for half an hour, an hour, and wait for somebody to finish their meal and get in their boat and go, so I can unload my fish.

SB: Wow. There's nobody docking their boat there?

ML: No, nobody. It's just for –

SB: [inaudible] commercial fishermen.

ML: It's just for the –

SB: Customers?

ML: For the customers.

SB: I see. Is there anything else besides selling to Casablanca? Is there anything else in the agreement with Casablanca? I'm asking you about the dock because I hear a lot about fishermen selling to a certain place because they can't put their boat there.

ML: Not really because where Miami River Lobster is, he has docks, but he charges his fishermen for the dock. Even to keep the traps, they got to pay monthly rent where they keep the trap. If they tie there to his dock, they got to pay rent. So there's no (pancake?).

SB: Nothing for free. Tell me a little bit about your business costs, like overhead and things – you tell me you pay eighty dollars now for the boat. How was it in the past? Did it become a little bit easier or more difficult to pay for things like your gear, your bait, maintenance of the boat, all of these things? How have they changed since you started?

ML: Well, maintenance of the boat – when you have to haul it out – I used to be able to haul it out for four or five-hundred dollars, painting the bottom myself. They've gone up quite a bit. Year before last, they painted it – I didn't paint it. Just to haul it out, they pressure clean it, do a little bit of sanding on the bottom to make the paint stick better, I think I paid thirteen-hundred dollars. This year, in the same place with different owners, they wanted to charge me fourteen-hundred dollars, and I didn't go there. Well, I was going to go there, but I didn't because they gave me the run-around. I told them, "When can I bring my boat?" She says, "Bring it Friday morning." I went there Friday morning, not with the boat, with my truck. I said, "Can I bring the boat?" She said, "Oh, no, bring it this afternoon." So I took it in the afternoon. They kept me around there until about five. They said, "We're not going to be able to haul it out. We'll haul it out tomorrow morning, Saturday." Okay. Go in there Saturday. They told me. "No, in the afternoon or tomorrow, Sunday." I got angry. I told them, "Look, I'm going to take my

boat. I'll check with you [on] Monday." He's still waiting for me to check with them. So I went next door, and I did the work myself. I only paid seven hundred dollars.

SB: So, in the past, how did that [inaudible] your business? You paid less, but did you make less money also? The proportion has changed? Is it more difficult now to do all of this maintenance and pay for gear? Is it more expensive? That's what I'm asking – compared to what you [inaudible].

ML: Yes.

SB: It's clearly more expensive in today's money, but I'm asking if proportion-wise – in the past, maybe it took twenty percent of your income to do that maintenance. Is today more, thirty or forty percent? Is that what you're saying?

ML: Yes. More.

SB: What about in terms of regulatory expenses, like permits, the cost of buying permits for fishing? How did that change? How did that affect you?

ML: I didn't buy them.

SB: You don't have to buy them?

ML: No, the permits I got – when they sent me a letter – NOAA sent me a letter that I have to have a thousand-dollars in trip tickets for snappers and groupers, I had them. So I got the license for free. I didn't have to buy it.

SB: I see. So you don't have [inaudible], and you never had?

ML: No, I never had to buy them. I had the king mackerel. It didn't cost me anything because I qualify. When they came out with that for the snapper and grouper, I got the unlimited snapper/grouper license. That's the goody. I got my king mackerel. I've got one wahoo with my life. I got the wahoo dolphin. [inaudible] sometimes I'll catch a few. Like I say, if they come there to [inaudible] where I'm fishing. So I got [inaudible] within the law.

SB: You sell dolphin? It's used for restaurant meat?

ML: Yes. The mahi. Yes, I sell them to Casablanca here.

SB: Because you fish in federal waters most of the time?

ML: No.

SB: State waters?

ML: State waters.

SB: State waters.

ML: I usually fish north of the Cut.

SB: North of where?

ML: The Government Cut. I usually fish there, north of Government Cut. Sometimes I'll fish right off – just south of Government Cut there to the sewer around there. I don't fish too much off Key Biscayne.

SB: There's no state regulations for fishing there?

ML: No. As long as I have my licenses.

SB: The license per se doesn't cost any money?

ML: Yes, I got to – I pay forty, fifty dollars.

SB: A month?

ML: No, no.

SB: A year?

ML: Once a year.

SB: Once a year.

ML: The NOAA license.

SB: Got it.

ML: Then my restriction for the boat is forty-nine, fifty dollars. I pay a hundred dollars for the saltwater [inaudible] license. So if I want to take a friend of mine fishing, something like that, they don't have to buy it because I got it. So they can fish, and there's no problem.

SB: How well are the laws enforced on the water? Do you see other fishermen or other people breaking the law? What do you think about that?

ML: Well, there used to be a bunch of people there – I don't see them no more. I don't know if they caught them, or that they were fishing illegally. They don't have a commercial license on the boat. I do. I stick out like a sore thumb. I get checked all the time. Those people never got checked.

SB: You think there's people who fish commercially but don't have the commercial license?



ML: If you go out there every day –

SB: It's commercial. Yes.

ML: You got to be commercial. You sit there catching kingfish all day and mackerel – commercial. They don't get checked at all. One time, I got angry. I got stopped on the Miami River by marine patrol. I tell them, "Hey, look. Here's my [inaudible] ticket. I just sold my fish at Casablanca." He went through my ice and checked the boat. Then he says, "Oh, I'm training him." I said, "Well, you should have told me in the first place."

SB: He's doing what?

ML: He was training. He had a greenhorn with him, showing him the ropes. I said, "There's people out there fishing right now. They don't have licenses, and they never get checked." He says, "Where do they tie up?" I said, "No, they don't tie up. They launch from the Japanese garden there, the boat ramp at the Japanese garden in Key Biscayne."

SB: What's that? The Japanese garden, you said?

ML: Yes, Japanese garden. They've got boat ramps over there next to the Miami Outboard Club.

SB: Interesting.

ML: I don't know if they caught them. I never saw him – they used to go out on a little aluminum dingy with an outboard, no icebox. They used to throw the fish there on the water there and cover them with a burlap sack. I guess they caught them because I never saw them again. There was quite a few there fishing. I don't mind them fishing, but don't do it next to me. One day, I was catching kingfish there in the Government Cut, in the Government Cut channel, and one of them came. He threw his anchor. The first thing he did – he got his phone and called all his buddies. I know he doesn't have a license, and he's banging into my boat. I said, "Hey, I'm not going to move. You're banging too much. Go re-anchor and get away from me." Then my yellowtail spot – one day, he went there, and he anchored, and I left. I go back the next day, and I [inaudible] to the southwest. I see him coming. So I took off. Then, another day, he surprised me. He came from the south. By the time I saw he was there, I told him, "Don't you know how to fish by yourself? Look at all the ocean around. Why don't you anchor two blocks to the west or two blocks to the east or two blocks to the south or north of me? Why do you always have to come and fish?" "Oh, no. The ocean is for everybody. It's free." So I told him a dirty word. He insulted me. He called me everything from SOB [son of a bitch] to everything. What could I do? Pull my anchor and ram him? So I left.

SB: You think he was following you because he knew you know what you were doing?

ML: Yes.

SB: I see. How else did that affect you? Did that affect your fishing per se?

ML: No. He's a dummy. When you fish with a yo-yo, you take out line. You take maybe sixty, ninety feet out. This dummy – and then when he was pulling in the fish, he's winding. I don't wind my yo-yo. I got my yo-yo there. I just keep it up to the side, put the line on the deck. He's a dummy. But I heard – that's maybe why I don't see him – he got cut here. Coming in at night, he had, I think, sixty mangrove snappers. Marine patrol got him. He was over the limit. The sport fisherman [can] only catch ten yellowtails and ten mangrove snappers. They got him. So I haven't seen him out there anymore.

SB: No more? Any other incidents like that in the past that you remember?

ML: No, it was just that guy.

SB: It's amazing that you learned how to fish by yourself, and you're obviously successful. Not everybody does it, right? It's not something that you learn intuitively. Still, how did you know what's the best fishing practice? How did you know? I cannot go out there and figure it out for sure. [laughter]

ML: Well, I don't fish much in the bay. A couple of years ago, I fished in the bay right here for mackerel. You have to go there before the tides start flooding because they come in with a flood tide. When I was a kid, I used to come and fish in the bridges. I used to come on bike. I used to come all the way here to [inaudible]. With the flood tide, I used to catch Spanish mackerel, white bucktail, [inaudible] bucktail. They come in with the flood tide. This place, we call it the "bite of the cape," right there, right in the middle. They call it bite of the cape because [inaudible] like that. They call it the bite of the cape. There's a spot there that mackerel like to hang around, and crevalle jacks and blue runners and bluefish, sharks, blacktips – sometimes there's a lot of blacktip sharks when the fish are there. That place with ebb tide – when the tide is ebbing, that's when they show up. They come out of the bay, and they show up there usually. That's what Mr. (Diagamo?) said. He should know because he was born and raised there, and that's what he did all his life – fishing.

SB: So you basically learned through experience?

ML: Yes, through experience.

SB: You fished all your life, more or less.

ML: Yes. But for me, right there, at the bottom of the cape, I learned that from Mr. (Diagamo?) because I used to fish mackerel there when the mackerel used to show up here. I figure when they did away with the mackerel net, the only one they messed up – like, Mr. (Diagamo?) used to have a six-hundred-yard net, only fishing twenty-four feet of water. Not like the big boats that got miles and miles of net and they fish out there in a hundred, hundred-and-twenty feet of water. They still can do it, but the small boats – they can't do it no more. I figure there's going to be plenty of mackerel. I don't see them. Even with the kingfish, they got a closed season. I don't know how many I can catch now. This part of the season, you can only catch fifty; another you

can catch seventy or seventy-five. There used to be more kingfish here. They don't show up no more. I don't know – maybe too much pollution, stuff that comes out of the river there, the bay. I don't know. That's one of the things that – if I'm fishing, I can catch a hundred or two hundred kingfish, let me catch them because maybe you go out there the next day and they will be gone. They won't be there because they might be traveling.

SB: So you're saying a season catch limit is better than a daily catch or a trip catch?

ML: Yes, a trip catch. I don't know. A certain time you can only catch fifty, and there's another time that they let you catch seventy or seventy-five. But if I can catch a hundred or two-hundred, because like I say, they're there today and maybe tomorrow they will be gone.

SB: Right. So you've never had other problems on the water. Nobody tried to steal your gear?

ML: No.

SB: Let's talk about superstitions. Do fishermen have superstitions about fishing? No? You don't.

ML: I don't.

SB: Do you have any rituals that you perform like some people?

ML: [laughter] No.

SB: No. Nothing like that. But you do look at the weather pattern.

ML: Yes, I look at the weather.

SB: Weather and tide. The tide is important. What about other animals, like birds? Do they give you any clues?

ML: Birds? Birds I like, even though they're a pain because sometimes I might be looking. I see the seagulls dive or a pelican, and I know the bait is there. But sometimes you're out there fishing, and the seagulls drive you nuts because they like pilchards. Every time you throw a pilchard there, they come – *whoops*.

SB: And steal it?

ML: And then you see a swirl of a kingfish or a mackerel that went by, and they pluck it right out of the water. They're a nuisance.

SB: What about in terms of the beginning of the – let's say at the end of the year you prepare for your season of fishing. Before that starts, do you have –? You told me a little bit about if there's a cold front, you know that there's going to be a good season for king mackerel, I think you mentioned.

ML: No. When you get a hurricane in the Carolinas like we did this year – we had a couple of them, especially the one that went through the Bahamas – that will move the fish early down. But like I said, they kept on going. No, I was talking to Pam. I think the people that she checks [inaudible] some of them go up to Jupiter. Jupiter's been dead this year. It's been slow, I heard. Pam told me that. They're catching kingfish, but not like they do other years. Like I said, everything is in a cycle.

SB: For example, June, July, you start a new season of fishing supposedly.

ML: Yes, summertime fishing.

SB: Summertime fishing.

ML: The kingfish are gone. You might catch a kingfish here and there, a straggler. [inaudible] yellowtails, mangrove snapper, and snappers. That spot that I used to fish, but I lost the mark. There's groupers there, but the [inaudible] I had they messed me up. They took smart buoys that they had there with the mark, the [inaudible] for the ships. They took them away. That one, the one that was in the south end of the [inaudible], I use it to get my [inaudible] with the condos there at Fisher Island. They took the buoys so now I'm lost. So a friend of mine that has it on a GPS, he's dove there – ninety feet of water. He says there's groupers and mangrove snapper and stuff like that. He changed work. Now he's busy. He doesn't have any time.

SB: To come show you?

ML: To come and show me. He has another GPS. I don't have a GPS boat. I'll get [inaudible], and I'll find it.

SB: I was going to ask is there something that clues you in about – around May, do you look for some clues as to how the yellowtail season, for example, will be? Is there anything that could tell you, oh, the yellowtail season is going to be bad or is going to be excellent?

ML: Well, the water gets kind of warm, and they start showing up. Usually, I got two spots. I got one right there just inside the sea buoy, sixty feet of water, and I've got another one further north. I start chumming. If they're biting, I'll fish the same spot every day. That's the only thing I'll do. Where I fish yellowtail and mangrove snapper, I fish the same spot every day. I give them chum. They're there because they know to get their food. They'll be there. But I need a current, especially north. That's the best. If there's no current, they won't bite. If the current is going south, sometimes they bite, sometimes they don't. So right around April, I start fishing in there in April. I'll start going there and fishing. I'm catching a few and chumming, catching a few, and chumming every day. If I go up there and, if by eight o'clock, the king mackerel are not biting, I'll come in there and start fishing yellowtail, especially now I got to do it because if they close it in June and July, I can catch some in April and May before they close it.

SB: Okay. Let's talk about hurricanes. How do hurricanes affect you? Do they affect you in any way, good or bad?

ML: No.

SB: No?

ML: No. As long as I don't blow my shingles in my house. [laughter]

SB: No, okay.

ML: Fishing, no.

SB: So, the riverfront has changed dramatically. You mentioned the fact that there used to be about three fish houses, you could sell your fish. Now there's only Casablanca that you find viable. How does that affect you? And the fact that it used to be a working front, right? There used to be a lot of fish markets and places where you could dock your boat, and places you could put the traps and all of that. There's less and less of that. Did that affect you in any way?

ML: No.

SB: Not really.

ML: No.

SB: Tell me a little bit about – what do you love the most about what you do?

ML: Freedom. [laughter] I've got no bosses. I go and come as I please.

SB: Would you change that if somebody offered you a job with more money, but you would have your boss?

ML: No.

SB: No? Okay. Let's think back about your life on the Miami River as a fisherman. What stands out the most? If you look back at your life, what is it that comes to your mind that's the most important? What is it? Is there something?

ML: Well –

SB: Favorite memories or horrible moments, any of that. Nothing?

ML: Horrible moments? The Miami River is becoming a concrete jungle.

SB: It's becoming what?

ML: A concrete jungle.

SB: A country jungle.

ML: Concrete.

SB: Concrete jungle.

ML: It's all these buildings going up.

SB: High-rises.

ML: High-rises.

SB: You don't like that.

ML: No. Do you like it?

SB: No.

ML: You having trouble getting from [inaudible] to Miami, no? Driving down?

SB: I am driving, so I don't even see it.

ML: Yes, but the traffic jams?

SB: The traffic is terrible, yes.

ML: It's going to get worse. It's not going to get any better because they keep building more and building more. Paradise is going to hell. That's what Miami is.

SB: You used to think of it as a paradise?

ML: Hey, [from] any place over here you used to see the old courthouse. Now, unless you go over there and stand next to it, you can't see it anymore. Buildings all around. Everywhere you look, you got [inaudible]. You look out there from the ocean, every place you look, you see the cranes. More buildings coming up. More condos coming up.

SB: Where do you live? You say you leave the boat on the canal.

ML: Seybold Canal.

SB: Seybold Canal. You live close by?

ML: Yes.

SB: You live close by.

ML: Not close by, but – in the morning, I don't have trouble getting to my boat. Fishing shrimp, yes, because it's usually – like this coming Sunday, I got to leave early – no, there's not too much traffic on Sunday, but during the weekdays, if I'm going to go shrimping, especially I got to be there before nightfall, the traffic – I got to leave my house around four. I want to be here to the [inaudible] or wherever I'm going to go fishing shrimp before it gets dark.

SB: So, that is pretty bad.

ML: I live in [inaudible] 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 13<sup>th</sup> Street. I don't live that far from here.

SB: Still, the traffic has changed dramatically and your commute.

ML: Yes. In the morning, no, because in the morning –

SB: You go early.

ML: – 4:30 in the morning, I go down to the boat. By the time I get there, it's quarter to five. I go out, catch my bait, and then go fishing. But for shrimping, during the week, if I got to go, traffic is – 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue is like that [claps hands].

SB: Yes. But if you look back, do you think there were some moments in your life as a fisherman that were very difficult?

ML: No.

SB: No, not true. That's great.

ML: The only difficult – sometimes, the bait gets tough. Catching bait gets tough sometimes. It never fails; when there's plenty of bait, there's no fish. When there's plenty of fish, that's when the bait gets tough. [laughter]

SB: What do you do then?

ML: What?

SB: What do you do? Do you get some other type of bait or no?

ML: No, no. I got to look for live pilchards. The problems I've had – there was one year there in late May, early June, there was [inaudible]. I was catching two-hundred, two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. The only place I was catching maybe four or five hundred pilchards was in the Venetian Causeway, over there where the Miami Herald used to be. I'm there, five in the morning, casting a net. In that place there, you cast your net, and as soon as it hits the water – because if you let it go down, it's all kind of junk over there. It will hang up the net and tear it up. You'll lose your net. Here comes a Coast Guard inflatable with lights on – “Hey, captain.

Get away from the bridge.” I back up and say, “What’s the problem?” He says, “You can’t be catching [inaudible].” I said, “What do you mean? There’s no law.” “Don’t tell me.” I said, “There’s no law. They did away with the law years ago, the state.” Years ago, the state – you have to be a quarter of a mile from the bridge to cast net. They did away with it. “Don’t tell me. [inaudible] I’m going to arrest you.” So I had to leave. I couldn’t fish that day. The next day, I come out of the river, and I’m going up there. [inaudible] over there by the (Royal Caribbean?) there – dark. As soon as he sees me, he came across the [inaudible] with the lights on, “Captain, didn’t you understand what I told you yesterday?” Another day I couldn’t fish. [laughter] But this is the funny thing. When George Bush, Jr. was the President, I was – well, June, July, I usually go to the MacArthur Causeway by the Coast Guard base. You catch little pilchards like that for chumming and for fishing yellowtail. I can’t come through because a cruise ship – one of the cruise ships are there, so it’s restricted area. So I come on the southside. When I come there, I turn to go to the bridge there. There’s a Coast Guard in front of there with the lights. He comes to me and says, “Good morning, captain. Where are you going?” “I’m going to the bridge to catch bait.” “Okay, captain. Make sure you stay on the east side of the bridge. Don’t come to the westside because we got a security,” [inaudible] because the Bush was going to be there then. They had a security [inaudible]. So, where’s the law? The other Coast Guard captain was telling me that it was illegal to catch bait on the bridge. They all make the laws up.

SB: The Wild West law.

ML: That was difficult for me. I missed –

SB: Yes. What are you supposed to do?

ML: That was the only place I was catching bait. [inaudible] Before daybreak, the reflection of the lights, they like to [inaudible]. He runs me out there one night, and the next night, I come there, but he was there waiting for me already in the mouth of the river there.

SB: What do you think the fishing industry means to the city of Miami and the region in general, the greater Miami region?

ML: It’s good. People like to eat fish and stuff like that.

SB: Do you think your industry’s important for the character of Miami?

ML: Yes, because they got – lots of people like seafood and stuff like that. They got to go to the fish house and the restaurants. Most of them sell – right there on the river, they sell – besides selling steak and stuff like that, I guess they sell seafood, too. They’ve got Garcia’s over there next to Casablanca. Then there’s another restaurant there next door. They made another restaurant. I guess they sell seafood, too. I guess they buy them from – they don’t buy them from the fishermen. They buy them for the warehouses and stuff like that, from a fish market like Casablanca.

SB: What do you want the future generations to know about you and the industry you’re in, the fishing industry? Is there something?



ML: I don't know. [laughter] Don't become a fisherman; it's getting worse. They keep making more laws and more regulations. I was telling Matt that. I want to meet the guy – because they closed the snapper for two months when they're spawning. You used to be able to catch ten. Now they brought it down to five. How can I make a living with five snappers a day, if I catch? And it's not guaranteed that I'm going to catch them. Tell me.

SB: Yes. Doesn't sound very [inaudible].

ML: Then, like I was telling him, I got to compete against the sharks. Because I found a spot right here, right of Key Biscayne, I went there and anchored there one day, about a hundred-and-twenty-feet of water [inaudible] bottom – *whoosh* – shark. Got him – hook and everything. I put another hook – I hooked seven snappers. Out of the seven snappers, I was only able to get half a snapper. Do you know what I did? Wind in my yo-yo and I left. I went back the next day. The first bait down, snapper. As soon as I got him off the bottom –

SB: Shark?

ML: I've never gone back. I've got to go there and compete with the sharks, too. Now they're protecting the sharks.

SB: You don't think that's a good idea to protect the sharks?

ML: How many sharks? Remember, we know more about the moon than we do about the ocean. The Bahamas is loaded with sharks, and they're protecting them, too, over there now. Here, they're protecting them. The guys who used to fish shark here, they quit because they only thing they can catch is bulls and blacktips. The rest of the sharks, if they come – even if they're dead, they got to throw them away. So they sold licenses, and they quit.

SB: The bulls are the ones protected.

ML: No. The bulls, you can catch them.

SB: You can catch them.

ML: The ones that are protected are hammerhead, lemon, the tiger, the thresher – I guess the dusky too, and the sandbars. The only thing that I heard that you can catch are the bull sharks and the blacktips.

SB: Those are hard to catch? I didn't understand why they sold their license.

ML: How many bulls you catch a day?

SB: Right.

ML: [laughter] I mean, if you can go out there and catch twenty or thirty bull sharks a day, yes.

SB: Got it. There's not enough variety to be able to make a living, basically.

ML: No. And blacktips, right there in the sandbar, when there's fish there, it's loaded with blacktips. You can only put a ten-hook longline there, I think. They don't let you put a hundred-hook longline or anything like that. Besides, look at the shark fish that they caught there in the airport the other day. They confiscated it.

SB: But do you think there's a lot of sharks that shouldn't be protected necessarily?

ML: I don't know. There's no way you can – I told Pam one day – you can count pigs and deer and stuff like that; you can't sharks out there. I think the ocean [inaudible] sharks.

SB: They affect your fishing.

ML: Oh, yes. I was fishing yellowtails that one year; I had to quit. I didn't go back. Every time I hooked a mangrove snapper –

SB: They got him.

ML: One time, he came right – the bull, he came right there to the stern of the boat, he directly hit the stern of the boat. He was trying to get the snapper. I'm going to fish for them? [laughter]

SB: I understand.

ML: Like I said, the only thing I can do is get a shark license, and when they're there, beat them over the head, open his stomach up, and let him go. Maybe the other ones – if there's any more – they'll feed on him and let me fish. Probably, if they catch me doing that – I cut one up. My mom's neighbor, he likes – he said, "Bring me a little shark." I caught a little shark like that. I don't know what he was. I got stopped by marine patrol there at the mouth of the river. They kept me there for at least forty-five minutes. They kept taking pictures and sending it to the scientists. They never determined what kind of shark it was. They let me go. They only gave me a warning. [inaudible] numbers, and my numbers were too close. They got to be a little bit [inaudible]. I said, "Look, I've had them like that for years. Never in my life [have] they told me anything about it." But they wanted to nail me for the shark.

SB: This was a mistake.

ML: This was last summer.

SB: Last summer? Do you have any children?

ML: No.

SB: No. But if you would have, you would not want them in the fishing business?

ML: No.

SB: Is there anything else that you want to tell me about fishing on the Miami River? About fishing as an occupation? About the regulations? Anything that you didn't tell me or I didn't ask you?

ML: The regulations – I don't know. I heard that they wanted to close the mangrove snapper season to a month or two months, just like the yellowtail. If they do that, what am I going to fish for? If I can fish yellowtail [and] I can fish mangrove snapper, I might get by – a snapper here, a snapper there. But usually, that time of the year, the snappers are out there spawning. I know they're trying to protect it. I understand that. But I see the little snappers because I catch them all the time; I got to throw them back. They don't make eighteen inches. A sixteen-inch snapper, that's a snapper that weighs two, two-and-a-half pounds if it's nice and fat. Like I say, then if I'm going to go out there to catch five snappers and then I'm going to have to compete with the sharks unless the snappers are all this big, maybe I'll make some money. Don't weight fifteen, twenty pounds each. I think they're going too far with the regulations and stuff like that. Like grouper – okay, close it January and February, maybe March. Let us catch some grouper when they're out there. That spot that I found that I found there, up to the north of the Cut, I've never been able to fish it again because it's closed.

SB: A few more questions about how fishing has helped you support your family. Did fishing give you a good life economically? Were you able to put aside for retirement? I know you're still working. You retired, and you still work. How much longer do you think you're going to be working? Is this something you do because you like it or do you need the money?

ML: No, I like it.

SB: You do it because you like it. You don't really need – so it gave you a good life?

ML: I didn't live like a millionaire. People got to live with what they make. If you make five hundred a week, you can go out on the weekend and spend a thousand. You know what I mean? Some people live like that. Some dummy in the fish house – one year, there were plenty of shrimp. That week, I think the check was fifty-five-hundred dollars, something like that. He looks, "Whoa, boy. You're going to have a big party this weekend?" I said, "Party?" He said, "Yes, with the big check." I said, "No, no. Five thousand is going in the bank. I'm going to keep five hundred." "What?" I said, "Yeah, [for] when the boat breaks down or something like that." So, some people, they got that mentality. They make five hundred dollars a week, and then they go on the weekend, and they spend a thousand. But I save my money. I'm not going to throw it away.

SB: You never know. Alright. Well, thank you so much.

ML: You're welcome.

SB: Unless you have anything else to tell me, that's the interview.

ML: Tell the scientists – tell the people making the law – shut that off.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/20/2020